

## **CLAIR Fellowship Program 2011- My Impressions**

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My late October trip to Japan was part of a North American study tour organized by the Japan Local Government Centre (JLGC) of the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR). This was my first visit to Japan and it made a tremendous and lasting impression. In addition to learning about local government in Japan, the North American study tour focused on the reconstruction underway in the Miyagi Prefecture following the March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

I watched the March 11 news reports of the earthquake and tsunami from my comfortable and safe home in Toronto and was horrified. It was an eerie feeling to see the devastation, first hand, and to hear about the experiences of our hosts in Tokyo, Sendai, Minami-sanriku and Ishinomaki. The human, environmental, economic and social devastation was tremendous.

The structure of local government is different in Japan from that of Canada. The responsibilities are clearly defined under the Local Autonomy Act and local authorities are recognized in the Constitution of Japan (article 92). Canadian municipalities are not recognized as a level of government in the Constitution; they are 'creatures' of each of the provinces. This means that the provinces determine the type, structure, numbers and role and mandate of municipalities that they establish. Like Canada, there appear to be tensions in Japan between the different levels of government over funding and mandates.

Notwithstanding those tensions, I was very impressed with the total government (local and national government) response to the March 2011 disaster. While there were unforeseen challenges, the state of preparedness for disaster was strong. Similarly impressive was the speed and scale of the response. Minutes after the earthquake, the Miyagi Prefecture asked the national government to deploy the self-defense force and held their first disaster response task force meeting. The head of disaster management from Minami-sanriku lost 36 of his own colleagues and he survived by holding onto the disaster command centre antenna as the tsunami/flood levels rose to 15.5 metres, well above the roof of the building. He was at work the next day.

We heard many stories about the strong culture and resilience of the Japanese people and their commitment to work together to help those in need. While in no way comparable to the support given during the disaster, the study tour saw evidence of the willingness to help many times from the volunteers sleeping in tents in Ishinomaki to the older man who came out of his home to help guide our bus in a series of tricky maneuvers to turn on a narrow road on a hill.

Our study tour also learned about the recovery plans for the communities affected by the earthquake and tsunami. Planning for recovery began almost immediately in the City of Sendai with a clear commitment to rebuild. They had a draft recovery plan by August 2011 and an approved plan in October. This comprehensive plan stated the intention to rebuild the community using natural energy sources, protect it from future disasters, rebuild the physical infrastructure and economy of the community, revitalize tourism, and rebuild the human and community resources.

The commitment to the environment is also evident in recovery planning and in separation of the debris for recycling. This is no small task - it was estimated that there was 29 million tons of earthquake and tsunami debris. The debris, which we saw being sorted in massive piles in the flattened communities, will be recycled at a cost of about \$6B USD.

While there was reference to the involvement of residents in the disaster recovery planning process, it did not seem to be as significant as I would have expected it to be in Toronto or other Canadian cities and towns. To some extent, this is because many of the residents have been displaced but there also seemed to be a more fundamental difference in resident engagement and participation.

We didn't hear much about the role of the nonprofit sector in Japan in the disaster. Prior to legislation introduced in 1998 that permits the incorporation of nonprofit organizations, they had previously existed in various forms including social welfare corporations and public benefit corporations. Back in Toronto, I would have expected that the diverse nonprofit sector would have played a much larger and more visible role in both the disaster response and in the disaster recovery planning process.

My final observations relate to the transportation system which is fast, efficient, clean, and extensive and to the obvious pride in the public space in Tokyo and the other cities we visited. We are in the midst of discussions about our transit system and I look with envy at the Tokyo system; and we can learn much from the respect that the Japanese people have for their public spaces.

I returned to Toronto with a feeling of *Kizuna* or 'bond of people' with my Japanese hosts and with the communities I visited. I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in the study tour as a representative of the Canadian Urban Institute to learn about local government in Japan and the March 11 disaster and am continually sharing my reflections with colleagues.

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